

Fauquier County Public Schools

Media Release

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SCHOOL SRO PERFORMS LIFE-SAVING HEIMLICH MANEUVER

Sgt. Sal Torelli knows exactly what the fear instilled by a life-threatening crisis looks like. He saw it on the face of a student at Warrenton Middle School on Tuesday, Oct. 4, and the haunting image lingers still.

"The look on that kid's face I know I will never forget," said the Warrenton Middle School Resource Officer, two days after he saved the student's life by performing the Heimlich Maneuver on the choking victim.

Sgt. Torelli was definitely at the right place at the right time. The Fauquier County Sheriff's Office first sergeant is assigned to Auburn Middle School as the SRO, and just three weeks ago he began fulfilling that role at Warrenton Middle School on a part-time basis as well. He works at WMS just two days a week – Tuesdays and Thursdays.

On this particular Tuesday Sgt. Torelli stationed himself in the cafeteria at lunchtime, as usual, to monitor students throughout the lunch shifts. It was a day like any other in a middle school cafeteria with students eating, laughing, and enjoying each other's company.

Shortly after 11 a.m., though, the typical lunch hour changed dramatically. A student not 10 feet away from Sgt. Torelli rose from his table and began to make his way toward Principal Wallicia Gill. The seasoned law enforcement officer recognized immediately that the student was in trouble.

"The boy jumped up, and I could see right away that he was in distress," he said. "It was a scary sight."

Coming to his aid in an instant, Sgt. Torelli asked the young man if he could breathe, but the student was unable to respond. "This kid was scared; he was struggling," said the SRO.

Springing into action, Sgt. Torelli did what he had been trained to do – administer the Heimlich Maneuver: once ... twice ... three times. Still, the food blocking the student's windpipe did not dislodge. As he continued to administer the Heimlich, Sgt. Torelli told the principal to call 911.

"I didn't have time to think," he said later, when asked if he thought the Heimlich just might not do the job this time. He simply tried again. And again.

On the fourth or fifth thrust, the food finally dislodged, and the student collapsed to a seat in relief. The near tragedy sent Sgt. Torelli to his knees.

"I sunk to the floor. It had me shaking on my knees," he said. "It was the scariest situation I've been in in a long time."

"He was a real trooper," said Principal Wallicia Gill. "He was not going to give up." Shuddering at what might have happened, the long-time administrator added, "I can't help but think how close we came to a real tragedy." While Mrs. Gill is certain she or others would have administered the Heimlich Maneuver had Sgt. Torelli not been present, she only knows she is grateful that the strapping sergeant was on hand to help the struggling student.

As students in the cafeteria realized what was happening, "things got very quiet," said Mrs. Gill, recounting the day's events. "They knew it was serious business." Applause erupted when the students realized their classmate was going to be okay, thanks to Sgt. Torelli.

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While the harrowing experience played itself out in just a matter of seconds, it seemed much longer to Sgt. Torelli.

"It seemed like it was forever. It seemed like an hour, but it was only 10 or 15 seconds," he said. Immediately following the incident, he was grateful to have the WMS administrators by his side. "I just needed to talk, to know that it was real, to know what had just happened," he said.

The New Jersey native, who moved to Fauquier County in 1973, has 20 years experience in law enforcement – five in Prince William County and 15 with the Fauquier County Sheriff's Department – and six years experience as a cardiac technician with the Cedar Run Rescue Squad in the 1980's. He undergoes CPR training, including the Heimlich Maneuver, every two years. He has responded to countless emergency response situations over the years, but the memory of Tuesday's incident will linger.

"It happened in the blink of an eye," Sgt. Torelli said. "I won't forget it."

On Thursday, Oct. 6, Sgt. Torelli was surprised to find balloons adorning a special seat for his use in the cafeteria as he monitored the day's lunch shifts. Mrs. Gill thanked him for his life-saving efforts and students offered a hearty round of applause for their newfound hero.



(Top left) Sgt. Torelli finds a specially decorated seat in the cafeteria in his honor.

(Top right) The SRO chats with students in the Warrenton Middle School cafeteria.

(Above and at left) WMS Principal Wallicia Gill expresses appreciation to Sgt. Torelli.